Mr. Nixon's War Veto

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President Nixon's veto of an appropriation bill, because it contained a ban on bombing Cambodia, raises the most disturbing questions about his command of the political scene in Washington and about the validity of his foreign policy in Indochina and elsewhere.

Does he not realize, to start, that both houses of Congress now have not only the votes but the determination to keep passing no-bombing riders? Their institutional pride is engaged. They are fed up with the war. That the President ignores these political realities suggests a remoteness from reality. The alternative explanation, that he believes he can win this test of strength, is based on what we think is a seriously flawed reading of the public mood. Even if he could force Congress to drop the bombing riders, moreover, the "victory" would be more costly than defeat, for it could only come about as a result of a prolonged war of the nerves in which Congress would be confronted with the prospect of the government grinding to a halt for lack of funds.

The whole struggle—the impasse in government, the division in the country—could be justified only if the President had an extraordinarily powerful argument for continuing the American war effort in Indochina over the clearly expressed objection of a majority of the peoples' representatives in Congress. We believe there is no persuasive argument for doing so. A close look at three aspects of his vetoe message—on the January agreement, the relationship of Cambodia to Vietnam and the international repercussions—indicates why.

The January agreement does envision, as Mr. Nixon said, a North Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and a Cambodian settlement. It envisions these, however, not as the early and designated results of the Vietnam cease-fire but as the eventual and desirable consequences of a Vietnam truce. The text says nothing of when or how these developments are to take place —hence the pointlessness in alleging "Communist violations" in Cambodia. The text says nothing to prescribe a continuing struggle among the Cambodians none of whom signed the agreement. It does not say that Hanoi's refusal to end its military activity is grounds for continuance of American military activity, and still less for a far greater American war effort. Nobody ever said this would be necessary; nobody can prove that were it to stop, the Cambodian insurgents might need no direct North Vietnamese support at all. The bombing allows the Phnom Penh regime to avoid the very negotiations which are Mr. Nixon's avowed goal.

The President professes to fear installation of a "Hanoi-controlled government in Phnom Penh"—while ignoring whatever Hanoi may feel about a Washington-controlled government. But it is indisputable that, no matter what government sits in Phnom Penh, Hanoi will be able to keep using Cambodia for purposes of supply and sanctuary in South Vietnam. Mr. Nixon and everybody else knew this perfectly well in January. He signed the cease-fire agreement anyway—for the good reason that he counted on South Vietnam's coping for itself despite the problem of the Cambodian flank. For him now to claim that bombing halt would shake the Southeast Asian "balance" which he negotiated in January is the kind of reckless overstatement which, if even partially true, calls into question durability of the whole January deal.

As for Mr. Nixon's contention that a bombing halt would deal "a serious blow to America's international credibility," it is nonsense—a relic of a way of thinking about international affairs which has been rendered obsolete by, among other things, Mr. Nixon's own considerable achievement in improving relations with Russia and China. It cannot possibly be the President's purpose, or to his advantage, to suggest that his new "structure of peace" will tremble to its foundations if he is not allowed to continue dropping bombs on hapless Cambodians. This is tantamount to conceding that his entire foreign policy is a fraud—a judgment, we might add, which we do not share.

We are left to ponder what it is that makes Mr. Nixon so determined to set good politics and good policy aside and instead to rush into a gratuitous and harmful collision with the Congress, with the country—and with his own best interests as well.